

*ACRL TechConnect*

Beth Sanderson and Miriam Rigby

# We've Reddit, have you?

## What librarians can learn from a site full of memes

**R**eddit dubs itself “the front page of the Internet,” and it often lives up to this claim; if something has gone viral on the Web, its rise to popularity is very likely due to it being linked to on Reddit.com and then subsequently spreading like wildfire from there. To a new user, Reddit may seem like a virtual wild west, full of ducks who give advice, adorable cats, and plenty of less savory content. But there is far more to be learned from the Reddit community than what appears on the surface. Digging deeper, one will find interesting discussions about libraries, late-breaking research studies, fun facts, and long, thoughtful threads on virtually any topic imaginable.

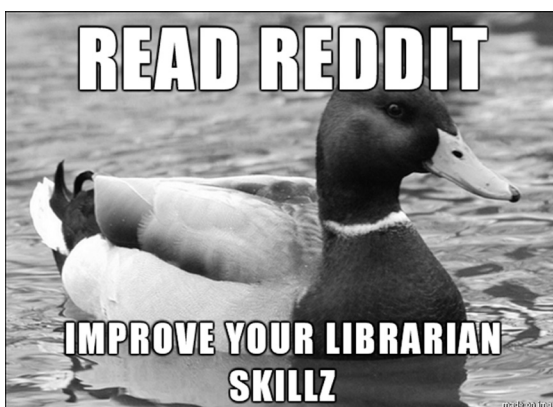
When it comes to social Web sites that are setting trends online and rapidly growing in popularity, librarians have a tendency to advocate for creating marketing presences, but this is not our purpose here. We think libraries should in fact *not* try to market on Reddit, but rather librarians should explore Reddit to observe *how* this community shares information, engages in discourse, and what it can teach us about information literacy,

information activism, scholarly communication, and marketing skills.

To begin with a brief overview, Reddit is an aggregate social networking site where users, or *Redditors*, post links from the Internet, original content, and self-posed questions. Fellow users upvote or downvote

these to promote interesting posts to “the front page.” As posts rise in popularity, they gain more visibility and the original poster receives more “karma” points. (Unpopular posts quickly disappear from view via downvoting.) Redditors receive karma for upvotes on their

links and comments, or they can lose karma for unpopular posts, even going into the negative—giving one incentive not just to post, but to post high-quality or especially interesting and relevant items. Any Redditor can comment on the posts, and these comments often generate interesting debate



Actual Advice Mallard is a popular meme on Reddit.

Beth Sanderson is research and instruction/science and technology librarian at the University of Washington-Bothell, e-mail: [bsanderson@uwb.edu](mailto:bsanderson@uwb.edu), and Miriam Rigby is social sciences librarian at the University of Oregon, e-mail: [rigby@uoregon.edu](mailto:rigby@uoregon.edu)

© 2013 Beth Sanderson and Miriam Rigby

or provide further interesting details on the topic at hand.

Additionally, anyone can read posts on Reddit without an account, and accounts can be entirely anonymous. According to a recent Pew study, 6 percent of adults who are online are using Reddit. This number rises to 15 percent for 18- to 29-year-old men, and Reddit is rapidly rising in popularity overall.<sup>1</sup> For this reason alone, Reddit should be on the radar of academic librarians.

Perhaps of special interest to librarians however, is how Reddit governs its behavior through the rules of *reddiquette* (Reddit etiquette) due to its parallels with information literacy. Reddiquette guidelines are created, followed, and self-enforced (with the help of official moderators) by the community, and in many ways these guiding principles encourage the same skills we try to instill in our students. For example, here are some relevant reddiquette guidelines<sup>2</sup> as they relate to tenants of information literacy:

- Evaluating sources and linking to high quality information—Reddit encourages users to link, vote, and moderate based on the quality of information, its relevance, and its factuality, rather than on opinions.

- Citing sources and giving credit where it is due—Reddit encourages users to link to the primary source whenever possible, rather than sending a reader down an unending link-rabbit-hole to find the original creator of the discussed content.

- Using proper grammar and spelling for intelligent discourse—Some subReddits<sup>3</sup> are more strict than others on this topic, but overall users are more respected and are seen as more reliable if they can write well.

Our casual observations of students, and discussions with them about Reddit, indicate

that reddiquette actually helps prepare students for college-level research and writing. In order to participate properly, Reddit, in essence, indoctrinates users into being information literate, lest they be downvoted into oblivion. Reddit-using students often come into our classes having strong information literacy skills; especially regarding evaluating information and knowing the importance of original sources and recognizing the author.

Students who are active Redditors often contribute greatly to class discussions on these topics, as they have more exposure to ideas such as the significance of authorship and authority, importance of evidence to back up claims, the need to track down original sources to verify information, and giving credit where credit is due (e.g. citing sources). Likewise, though repeat posts and posts claiming credit for other people's original content are sometimes successful, they are also regularly called

out by other Redditors. Awareness of this seems to help students understand the related issue of plagiarism.

Another aspect of information literacy that Reddit promotes

is the awareness of issues concerning information laws and ethics. Many of the student Redditors we have come across in classes are also primed to think about and discuss information activism, information and society, information ethics, etc., due to the major advocacy work that is channeled through Reddit, such as informing people and campaigning against/for legislation concerning digital copyright laws, privacy, net neutrality, censorship, etc. (including major campaigns against SOPA, CISPA, and PIPA). Other major areas of interest for the Reddit community include open access, open Internet, open society, and related issues in scholarly communication and publishing. Copyright law and open access feature heavily in top posts, likely related to the influence and social spheres of the late Aaron Swartz, Reddit founder and center of the recent JSTOR-MIT lawsuit scandal.<sup>4</sup>



Reddit logo.

The community's interest in the general topics of information laws and ethics, open society, and the like goes beyond just linking and upvoting stories and posts on these topics; the Reddit community also practices the tenets of these ideals. The subReddit /r/scholar is dedicated to the requesting and sharing of academic articles blocked behind paywalls. Allegedly operating under the fair use doctrine, this subReddit is circumventing interlibrary loan for many scholars who lack library resources or library services entirely.

Outside of /r/scholar, reddiquette also dictates that only freely accessible content should be linked from the site. Thus, non-open access scholarship is primarily discussed via news items and press releases about research, rather than actual research articles

Furthermore, subReddits focused on specific fields of study can serve a strong scholarly communication purpose, as a community venue for both professional and hobbyist scholars. For librarians and scholars, these subReddits can make it easy to keep up-to-date on breaking news in a certain field. The added benefit of communal discussions and discourse around these topics, as well as providing a generally welcoming venue to ask questions, makes the discipline-based subReddits highly valuable to subject librarians and students trying to learn about a certain field in a low-key and fun environment.

Any reasonable librarian tasked with marketing and outreach may start to think that this would be an excellent venue in which to promote library services. But this is where we



Redditors tend to prefer quality open access resources.

being directly cited, while open access scholarship appears to gain far more notoriety and direct citations.

In the future, this has the potential to have a large impact on scholars who are increasingly using more holistic methods of measuring their research impact and computing their impact factor through things like Altmetric<sup>5</sup> and ImpactStory<sup>6</sup>—Reddit is one of the social media sources being accounted for via these methods.<sup>7</sup> Reddit also acts to increase these alternative impact factor scores because, as noted regarding Reddit's impact on items going viral, the community can explode the visibility of research because people use it as an aggregate to get information to post to their own blogs, Twitter feeds, and other media venues, such as news blogs and articles. In recent months, Reddit has even featured numerous posts highlighting large news organizations citing Reddit as the source of their information or as the subject of their report.

return to our strong admonishment to resist such thinking. Reddit's "information literacy" functions much like a herd-immunity; enough people are acting to protect the herd most of the time.

Although incorrect information does sometimes rise to the top via the crowd-sourced voting mechanisms, any post that is popular enough will eventually be scrutinized by Internet-trolls and well-meaning reddiquette-monitoring users. This presents a problem for anyone looking to use Reddit as a marketing platform. If you are an active user with both link and comment karma, and your post is something particularly relevant to a subReddit group, by all means, it is worth posting there. However, if *all* that is being posted from an account is marketing and outreach items, or your account looks "official," you will be called out on it, your posts will likely to be downvoted, and you may get banned from a subReddit for spamming.

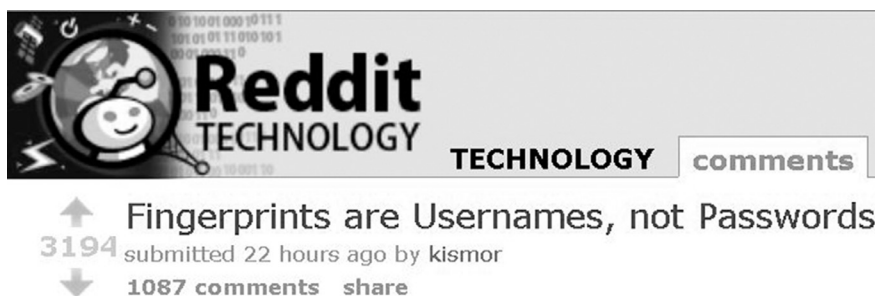
We witnessed one particularly sad attempt at marketing by a popular library vendor. Despite their account having been active for more than a year, it had barely any karma points for posting links and virtually no karma for contributing comments to discussions. One of the posts, which linked to a free download of their totally cool product (and which was completely relevant to the subReddit's topic) was downvoted so much that the subReddit's moderator told them to stop posting spam and suppressed all their current posts and future posts.

An additional issue for library marketing on Reddit is that it can be difficult to locate your "community" to promote to. Some towns and cities have local subReddits, as do many universities, but, unlike Facebook,

learning what works and doesn't work with marketing, seeing how users acquire information literacy skills, and how the Internet community advocates for information issues, Reddit has something for everyone and is highly relevant for librarians. We encourage you to explore the Reddit site and community for yourselves (just don't forget to turn off the Not Safe For Work [NSFW] content in your user preferences). To help get you started, we have compiled a list of subReddits that may be of interest to librarians, so feel free to upvote and comment.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

1. Maeve Duggan and Aaron Smith, "6% of Online Adults are Reddit Users," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (July 3, 2013),



Discussions of information privacy and new technologies are easy to find on Reddit.

people do not choose to follow a user's posts. People follow large and active subReddits, so you, as a marketer, are at the whim of the groups to which you are trying to promote yourself.

Although Reddit is not a reliable marketing venue, it is an excellent venue in which to study how to market—observing what is upvoted and why, and the discussions that evolve under each post. For example, a post's subject line can make or break its popularity. Likewise, by observing popularity trends, you can pick up trendy memes and popular jokes to incorporate your library marketing venues. This week it might be Game of Thrones memes, while next week, you could post photos of books with googly eyes.

Whether observing new forms of scholarly communication and information sharing,

accessed July 30, 2013, <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/reddit.aspx>.

2. "reddiquette," Reddit.com, accessed July 30, 2013, [www.reddit.com/wiki/reddiquette](http://www.reddit.com/wiki/reddiquette).

3. "subreddits," Reddit.com, accessed July 30, 2013, [www.reddit.com/subreddits/](http://www.reddit.com/subreddits/).

4. Bohyun Kim, "Aaron Swartz and the Too-Comfortable Research Libraries," ACRL TechConnect (blog), February 11, 2013, <http://acrl.ala.org/techconnect/?p=2823>.

5. "About Us," Altmetric, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://altmetric.com>.

6. "ImpactStory," ImpactStory, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://impactstory.org>.

7. "Where do scientists share public links to papers online?," Altmetric, accessed July 30, 2013, [www.altmetric.com/slides/slides\\_spton.html#7](http://www.altmetric.com/slides/slides_spton.html#7).

8. See <http://tinyurl.com/listacrl>. *ZZ*